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Thinking Class

*Sketches from a
Cultural Worker*

by
Joanna Kadi

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For Jan

Without you,
this wouldn't be possible.

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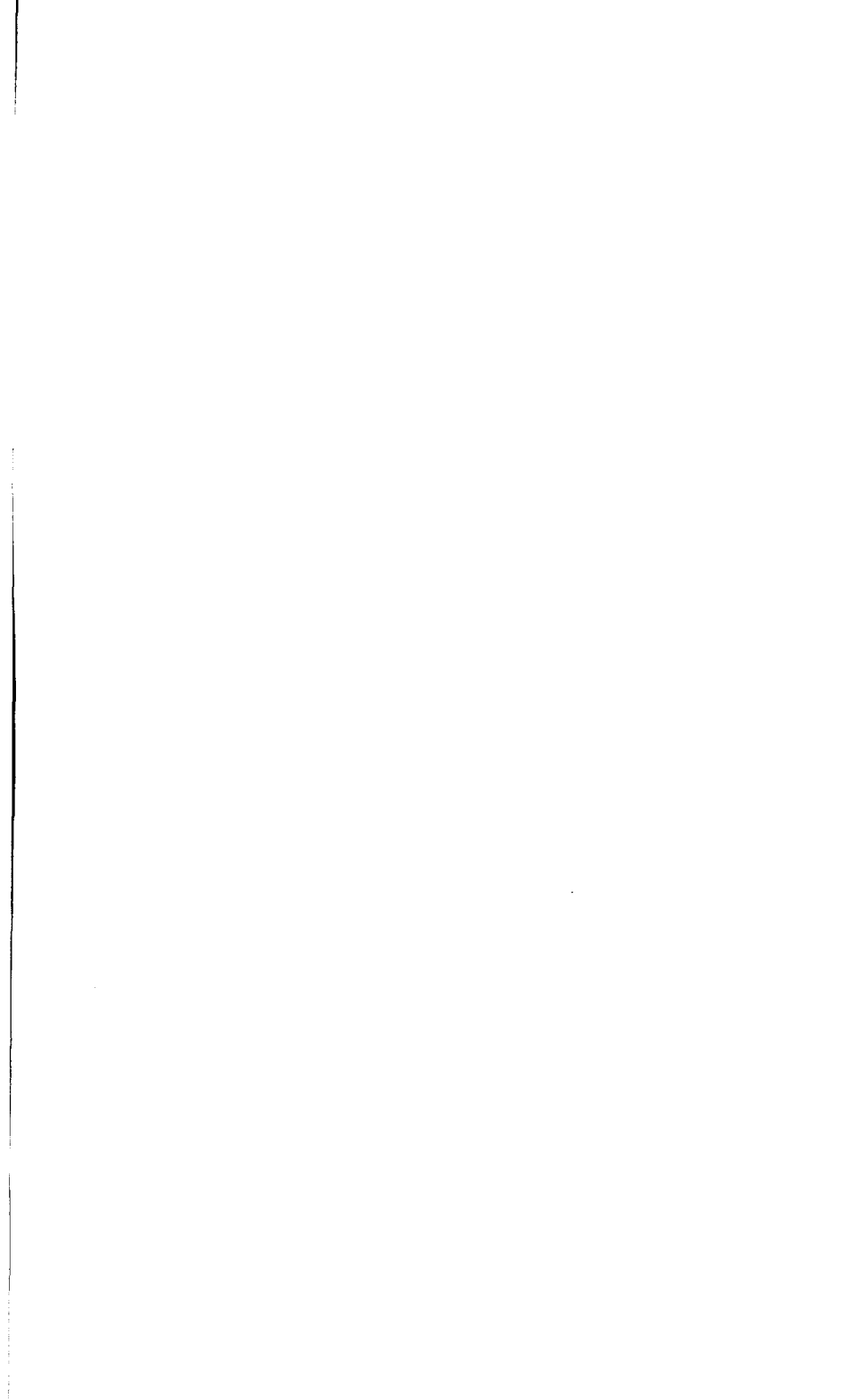
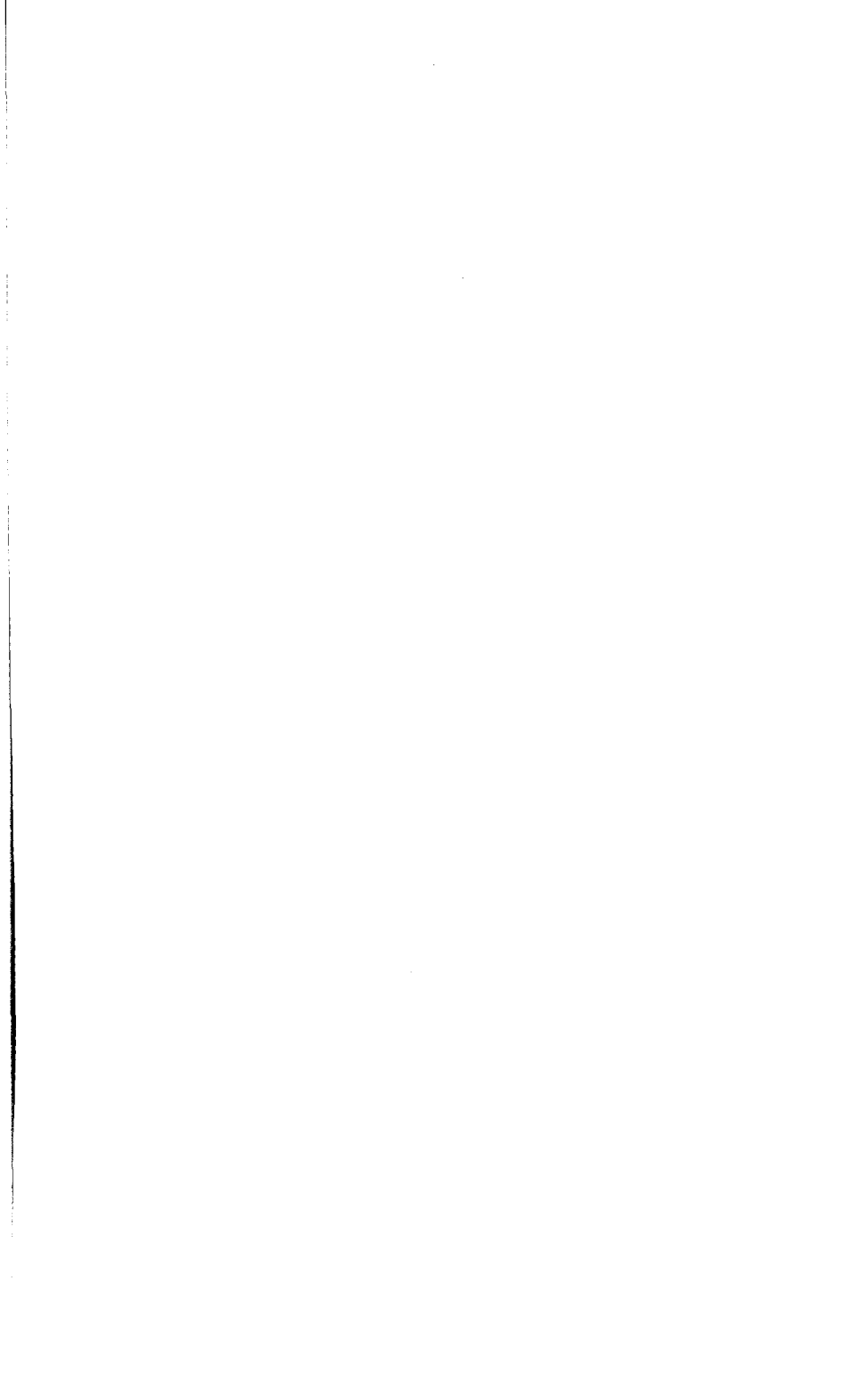


Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	3
Preface	5
Writing as Resistance, Writing as Love	9
Working-Class Culture: <i>Not an Oxymoron</i>	17
Looking Back	29
Catholic School Days: <i>Sketch Number One</i>	33
Stupidity “Deconstructed”	39
Halfbreeds	59
Catholic School Days: <i>Sketch Number Two</i>	63
Making Sense of My Happy Childhood/ Creating Theory	69
Coiled Tongues	89
Still Listenin to that Sentimental Twang	93
Catholic School Days: <i>Sketch Number Three</i>	109
Moving From Cultural Appropriation Toward Ethical Cultural Connections	115
Frightening Bedfellows: <i>Pop Culture and Imperialism</i>	129
Grey Mourning	139
Homophobic Workers or Elitist Queers?	143
Lines	159
Permissions	163
Index	164



Making Sense of My Happy Childhood/ Creating Theory

The hot room held eighty bored bodies waiting for fifty minutes to tick by. Our white male professor pompously read his only lecture concerning people of color: "The Family and Race." Up until this day, we had fulfilled our sociology requirement by listening to his sexist, heterosexist, and classist views on "the family."

Professor Clark stressed that Black people (other people of color not existing) place incredible emphasis on the family because of what they experience outside of it, a view I later found many people of color actually do hold dear. "Because of the racial harassment and prejudice that can plague these people in day-to-day life," he intoned solemnly, "they must have a safe refuge, a haven, where they can return at the end of the day."

I looked around my corner of the room at one South Asian woman, two Black men, and one Latina. Had any of them found a safe haven?

My home life didn't resemble those of the happy TV families I watched faithfully, and I never got that warm, fuzzy feeling kids supposedly have when remembering their childhood home. Instead, a familiar and ongoing terror literally froze up my joints whenever I thought about our small house on that corner lot. I

was subjected to an unrelenting combination of severe physical abuse, gross neglect, assaultive emotional and psychological imprinting, and sexual abuse that began after birth and did not let up until I moved away at age nineteen. My father, the main perpetrator of my abuse at home, belonged to a group of catholic laymen and priests who regularly ritually abused/tortured¹ me.

Taking these experiences and theorizing about them is fraught with difficulties. First, there are emotions. I've only been able to theorize about this abuse after doing a lot of healing. At earlier stages in this work, I felt too much pain to think concretely about what happened and what it meant. Only recently have I been able to set my abuse history in a more analytical, reflective framework. Which doesn't mean leaving my feelings behind, or thinking "objectively" about these issues. For me, that's not possible or desirable.

Second, there's the world of theory itself. Creating theory is loaded with questions, complexity, and issues of political power. Who creates theory, whose theory gets validated, whose language is spoken, who benefits? Where child sexual abuse is concerned, tension exists between some therapists and psychiatrists who consider themselves experts on our lives, and politicized survivors who insist we must analyze and make sense of these experiences ourselves. I'm uninterested in theory from self-proclaimed experts who have no sense of the political context in which families exist, who make sweeping generalizations about the monolithic group of child sexual abuse survivors. At the same time, I don't believe only survivors can create theory, or that theory must be identity-based.

I'm open to theory from politically aware, emotionally supportive allies who perceive the relationship between themselves and survivors as one of equal partners with different life experiences. I'm also open to survivors tackling issues that didn't directly affect them—for example, a white survivor offering perspectives on intersections between racism and child sexual abuse. My own theory, illustrated in this essay, springs not only from personal experience but from attempts to support oppressed groups I don't belong to.

sexual abuse of children

From infancy and into adulthood, I experienced ongoing sexual abuse at the hands of my father, several white working-class men, several white middle-class men, and two upper-middle-class white priests. Covert and overt attempts to get help failed, and I did what many victims do in order to survive. I repressed memories of these assaults. Freud documented this practice in his work; when children experience severe trauma but no one believes or validates what happened, they submerge the memories into the subconscious mind. If/when they reach a point in their lives when it's safe to remember, they will.

My memories surfaced after my discovery of feminism gave me the strength to leave an abusive marriage and find a therapist to help me deal with that trauma. It shocked me—but not my therapist, as she informed me later—to find myself swamped with childhood memories of brutal assaults. For the next several years, I experienced the aftereffects of my childhood. I struggled with deep depression, frequent self-mutilation, a desperation to commit suicide, anxiety attacks that lasted for days on end, pain so intense I had trouble breathing, and terror that immobilized me.

I couldn't think clearly about my experiences, but avidly read other people's words in hopes they would help. Available feminist literature proved a lifeline against alienation and craziness. Theory about child sexual abuse as misogyny made sense to me. I still felt terrified of men, anxious to please, and unable to trust. Adult experiences only supported these feelings. Male violence against women was as common as green grass in the spring, especially for the married women I knew.

Alone among social activists, feminists have named this issue, documented survivors' stories, broken social silence, formed a movement, affected legal change, provided resources and services for survivors, and written theory. Finding a social-change movement that validated my experiences, and offered resources for healing, drew me into feminist organizing. I spent several years as an activist working to end violence against women. I became familiar with basic feminist theory that named rape, wife-batter-

THINKING CLASS

ing, child sexual abuse, incest, and sexual harassment as manifestations of sexism and misogyny. According to this theory, when child sexual abuse occurs, male perpetrators commit acts on female victims that damage us, teach us about misogyny, and prepare us for a lifetime of serving men sexually and emotionally. This made sense to me, and placed my feelings about being female in a political context. I had always hated and been ashamed of my female body, so easily pried open, so easily ripped to shreds. I never felt good about being a woman, although I didn't want to be a man. I didn't want a specific gender as much as I wanted to be invisible, or rather, I wanted to be invisible to my perpetrators and visible to whoever might rescue me, although I doubted such a person existed. I didn't want anyone to perceive me as a possible sexual partner, and believed the fewer people who noticed me, the better.

I pushed on with my healing, and in my thirties reached a place where I could think clearly about my childhood. I had already begun working toward an integrated analysis of various oppressions, and understood the limitations and unhelpful, unethical nature of theories examining only sexism or racism or imperialism. Could I transfer this to child abuse? Could I examine child abuse without preconceived notions?

This essay is my first written attempt at such thinking. I've decided to focus on one type of abuse—child sexual abuse—because concretely analyzing all types of child abuse (psychological, physical, emotional, ritual, sexual) in one essay poses difficulties. While different forms often interconnect and overlap, I need to start by taking each form apart and examining it. Somewhere down the road, I'll juxtapose these in a larger context of interwoven abuse experiences.

I define child sexual abuse as an institutionalized structure encompassing different kinds of behavior that violates children. These include assaultive sexual actions ranging from inappropriate touching to anal/vaginal/oral rape, as well as child pornography and prostitution, voyeurism, and sexual harassment.

The trauma of child sexual abuse profoundly affects survivors in physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, spiritual, and politi-

cal ways. Although often carried out against an individual, child sexual abuse is political as well as personal, and I'm focusing here on the social, collective meanings of abuse. Child sexual abuse teaches us lessons about power—who has it and who doesn't. These lessons, experienced on a bodily level, transfer into the deepest levels of our conscious and subconscious being, and correspond with other oppressive systems. Widespread child sexual abuse supports a racist, sexist, classist, and ableist society that attempts to train citizens into docility and unthinking acceptance of whatever the government and big business deem fit to hand out.

Age difference and power differentials between adults and children create a compelling beginning point in my examination of child sexual abuse. *Children my own age didn't have the power to devastate me, adults did.*² When I think back on my experiences, I recall that difference in social location—their adult status, my child status—jumped out at me early on. So did other variables, most notably gender, race, and class. In my adult life, as I listened to heartbreaking story after heartbreaking story from other survivors,³ these differences popped up again. I heard stories of boys sexually abused by men, disabled girls sexually abused by able-bodied men, girls and boys sexually abused by women, girls of color sexually abused by white adults, working-class and working-poor children sexually abused by class-privileged adults.

Consider this scenario: an adult orally rapes a child. Do you think of an adult man raping a girl child? Are they of the same race and class? Which race and class? Are both able-bodied? I left the gender/class/race/ability of child and adult unspecified to show the many possibilities for filling in the blanks. While many people envision an able-bodied man and an able-bodied girl with similar race and class backgrounds, that limiting and limited understanding doesn't match my own experiences and the other survivors' stories that allow me to frame an understanding of the collective meaning of child sexual abuse. I have come to set child sexual abuse in a wider theoretical context as a phenomenon that stamps cultural lessons of power and dominance onto the bodies and minds of children.

THINKING CLASS

Child sexual abuse teaches children about social/cultural hierarchies in ways that ensure we'll remember the gist of it (if not the details). Stamping information on bodies and imprinting it into body memory guarantees a high retention rate. This information necessarily covers more than sexism, since sexism isn't the sole source of oppression; racism, classism, ableism, and the systematic oppression of children also figure into these lessons.

When a working-class man of color rapes a working-class girl of color, he uses her body as a slate for teaching about the power of sexism and adulthood. When a middle-class white man rapes that same girl, he imprints cultural hierarchies of classism, racism, adulthood, and sexism on her body. When a white woman rapes a girl of color, she teaches the girl that whiteness and adulthood equal power. When a white, middle-class man rapes a disabled, white, middle-class boy, he informs the boy that power belongs to able-bodied adults.

Isn't abuse in which racism, classism, and/or ableism play a part rare? Doesn't most abuse occur between male perpetrators and female victims? I've been asked these questions by people who disagree with my theory. Maybe a few cases of white men raping girls of color fall under the category of "statistically insignificant," an academic phrase designed to silence particular victims. Certain incidences of abuse cause feminists⁴ problems. For example, feminist theorists have generally not known how to handle stories of physical battering or sexual abuse by women. One writer called female-perpetrated incest "rare...(and) less serious and traumatic than incestuous abuse by male perpetrators."⁵ Another suggested that apolitical women resist male domination by taking it out on the children—a euphemism for child abuse.⁶ Both statements trivialize the experiences of girls and boys abused by women, and further traumatize survivors. They also indicate a reluctance to deal with abuse that can't be explained by sexism.

I'm not trying to argue on the basis of statistical findings but to push beyond current static and incomplete understandings of child sexual abuse. Suppose thirty years ago members of a liberation movement for people of color shared stories about

surviving childhood rape by white adults. Suppose that helped more men and women of color to remember and/or break silence around experiences of child sexual abuse by white adults. What would theory about child sexual abuse look like now? How would we expand such theory and move it forward? Even if the majority of child sexual abuse cases occur between an adult male and a female child of the same racial background, it's necessary, important, and ethical to devise theory that adequately addresses a wide range of experiences in which various oppressions present themselves.

In examining various oppressions, I don't want to ignore one type of oppression present in almost every instance of child sexual abuse—that is, adults' power over children. This directly connects to the oppression of children, a phenomenon ignored and unnoticed by most people. In this society, children are regularly ostracized, trivialized, and minimized. Frequently denied the right to have input in decisions that directly affect their lives, they can't engage in even the smallest acts of self-determination. In custody battles, many kids can't even state their preferences about which parent they want to live with; in school, they have little or no voice in their educational process. This oppression has been in place so long that few people notice the systematic way children's desires and realities are not only ignored but consistently denied.

There are other insidious examples of child oppression. Basic needs for food and shelter go unmet.⁷ Staggering numbers of children experience physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, and ritual abuse. Good childcare and positive educational experiences are rare; in the current posturing about balancing the federal budget, money is constantly cut from one institution that specifically serves children—the school. The current phenomenon euphemistically called “welfare reform” constitutes a direct attack on poor children, who have no direct voice in the governmental bodies enacting such “reform.” Then we have the right-wing push for “family values.” A pretense of concern for families covers an agenda guaranteed to devastate children: keep them at home with abusive parents; make divorce difficult no matter how much battering a woman and her children experience; prevent queer

couples from raising children. Last but not least is the terrifying increase in children who are drugged. The prescription of Ritalin for any child diagnosed as hyperactive, and anti-depressants for any child exhibiting symptoms of depression (which match the signs for abuse), has risen dramatically over the past couple of years. Instead of listening to kids, or checking for clues about home or social life, many psychiatrists, therapists, and parents seem happy to keep them stifled with drugs.

These examples of systematic oppression cannot be reduced to personalized, individualized, disconnected events. The oppression of children must be routinely woven into our theory, along with sexism, racism, classism, imperialism and ableism, and theory about child sexual abuse must contain *all* these elements.

In pushing for an understanding of child oppression, I'm not urging the pendulum to swing into the direction of the spoiled brat. That's just the flip side of the kid who's given no say. I'm looking for parents to set healthy, respectful boundaries, to allow the movement toward self-determination and thoughtful decision-making to correspond to a child's development. Rules aren't helpful here because each child is different, and of course cultural definitions of what constitutes a child and how to treat one vary wildly. While I'm aware of these complexities, I still believe all children have a basic right to food, shelter, clothes, education, respect, and freedom from abuse.

I also believe the systematic nature of child oppression impresses upon children that their desires, feelings, thoughts, and experiences don't matter. This early training sets the stage for adult life, in which this cavalier disregard for personal, family, and social suffering gets passed down through generations.

connecting child sexual abuse to other oppressions

One of my goals in this essay is to connect child sexual abuse and other forms of oppression. First, I want to document how the institutions of racism, classism, and ableism get played out in child sexual abuse. I believe child sexual abuse supports and reinforces these institutions, and thus serves the status quo.

racism

Child sexual abuse severely damaged my racial identity as Arab. A set of culturally specific, oppressive stereotypes around sex is attached to each community of color. Within these stereotypes, Arab men appear as beastly, animal-like, hairy brutes who will fuck anything that moves and who love being cruel. Arab women, like other Asian women, are painted as docile, exotic, anxious to serve men sexually, and filled with secret knowledge of exciting positions and actions. Once “opened up” by the right man (usually the white man), the Arab woman turns into a sex-crazed, sex-hungry “slut” who will beg for it all night long.

I didn’t experience these oppressive stereotypes theoretically or abstractly. The white men who abused me continually brought these ideas to the fore through verbal comments made before, during, and after their sexual assaults. They referred to my Arab features, remarked on my skin color, told me Lebanese girls enjoyed it, forced me to “belly dance,” and repeatedly threw epithets such as “Arab slut” at me.

Wider society had taught me—albeit not at such close quarters—that my Arab identity was suspect and shameful. These intimate assaults reinforced that. I hated being Arab; I wanted to turn my yellow skin inside out, to bleach my whole skin with the burning chemicals I applied to the hair on my upper lip, to assimilate without a backward glance. I can’t imagine any Arab girl holding onto pride in her cultural background in the face of similar ongoing assaults. I did not.

My father’s attacks further damaged my racial identity. First, he fit the stereotype of Arab men so well it caused me further shame, this time by association. Second, he broadcast his contempt for anything Arab through his abuse of me, a contempt arising in part from hatred of self.

I despised my father, in part because he played into racist stereotypes, in part because he hated women and children. And yet I was linked to him through blood *and* race. This connection caused me to further internalize racism.

classism

Intelligent depictions of working-class reality appear on the silver screen once in a blue moon. So I almost fell out of my seat at *Loyalties*, a film that critically examines child sexual abuse, race, class, domestic violence, heterosexual relationships, and friendship. I highly recommend it. That most Americans don't know about this amazing Canadian film angers but doesn't surprise me.

In the movie, an upper-middle-class white male physician plans to rape the Native, working-class daughter of the woman who cleans his house. While painful to watch, *Loyalties* proved a healing experience for me, because it clearly shows how class privilege connects with child sexual abuse. In order to abuse, an abuser needs access. The physician had access to the young girl partly because of his class location, just as the girl's father, a working-class Native man, had little access to the doctor's children, partly because of class location.

Access constitutes a central tenet of class privilege. Capitalism relies on rich people having uninterrupted access to poor people's bodies. Otherwise, how would work get done? And rich people can't rest after only securing access to our labor. They claim it all: dominance over every part of us, including our sexuality. Working-class women in factories experience routine harassment and sexual violation by men in positions of power, from foremen to executives. In these settings, class privilege counts every bit as much as male privilege.

Through child sexual abuse I learned about access—who has it, who doesn't. Many men gained entrance to my body, but not all men. None "beneath" my family, which included poor men, were granted this opportunity. But for men equal and above it was open season. Executives, teachers, and priests claimed access, demanded it in vicious ways. My feelings and thoughts remained inconsequential, as inconsequential as those of factory workers who don't enjoy inhaling thick smoke and standing in filth all day long.

As a child, I learned my class identity marked me and put me at high risk, and came to believe girls from privileged families had more protection. After all, if no one beneath my family could

get to me, the same must hold true for them. Since fewer men lived at or above their class level, they must be safer. Class identity protected them; mine endangered me.

In spelling out what I believed as a child, which originated in large part from the multiple assaults I experienced, I'm not saying class privilege prevents child sexual abuse. Plenty of middle-class and upper-class perpetrators violate their children.⁸

ableism

My understanding of this strand of oppression differs from the previous two; it doesn't emerge directly from personal experience, but rather from being an ally to disabled people. While it feels presumptuous to create theory based on someone else's experiences, particularly when able-bodied people like to present ourselves as saviors to the "poor unfortunates," it feels more irresponsible to ignore the issue or mention it only in passing.⁹

The term "bodily integrity" is used by disabled activists and/or survivors of child abuse to indicate a state of being in which a person controls her own body and who has access to it. Violation of bodily integrity is a trusted tool for keeping ableism's machinery running smoothly, and it often comes about through the "help" of able-bodied people. Articulating this doesn't deny or ignore the fact that some disabled people need assistance completing certain tasks. Neutral, casual, no-strings-attached assistance is one thing. I'm talking about help distinguished by lack of control on the part of disabled people, reinforcement of social power dynamics between able-bodied and disabled people, literal, physical handling of a person without consent or in spite of objections. While most disabled people communicate how, why, when, and where they want touch from able-bodied people, the latter group continually ignores this and tugs, prods, pulls, pushes, carries, turns, moves, or lifts after having made a decision for the disabled person. The medical system offers a stalwart example of painful hands-on touch and constant denial of bodily physical reality ("No, this doesn't hurt.").

Suppose child sexual abuse enters this picture—which it does with astounding frequency in residential schools and homes,

THINKING CLASS

psych wards, nursing homes, family dwellings, and “caregiving” facilities. Through talking with and reading the works of politicized disabled people, I’ve learned child sexual abuse runs rampant in these institutions and happens more often than not. From doctors to caregivers, from nurses’ assistants to staff workers and parents, disabled children remain at appalling risk.

A disabled child undergoing sexual abuse experiences something already well known—lack of control over her/his own body. In eerily-familiar ways, able-bodied adult abusers violate children’s space, and teach them that they can’t control how, when, or why touch happens. Once again, child sexual abuse reinforces lessons about powerful social institutions and how they work. Various kinds of physically intrusive contact—ranging from rape to having food shoved down your throat when you’re not hungry—drive home the ableist message that disabled people’s bodies are fair game for the rest of us.

Docile citizens

In the previous sections I examined the ways children learn about particular systems of oppression through child sexual abuse, how in its most general sense child sexual abuse serves the status quo. Now I want to continue looking at the same thing, but from a different angle, more of a macro level than a micro level. What happens in an oppressive society when a large proportion of people are sexually abused during childhood? What kinds of repercussions does this have for society at large? Does it support the status quo? If so, how? How does child sexual abuse affect all survivors—regardless of our race, class, or ability?

Child sexual abuse is a horrible thing. And it’s not just the isolated attacks, the rapes and violations, that make it so horrible. Rape is horrible. No question. *And* the system surrounding it is equally insidious, in some ways more insidious than the rapes themselves. Let me spell this out. I grew up surrounded by perpetrators who smiled in public and destroyed in private. I learned I was an object to be used, that no one respected my body, my personhood, my subjectivity. I experienced severe pain that seemed to me obvious, but no one responded. The world didn’t

give a damn. I grew up believing the world is a crappy place, always expected the worst, and always assumed no one cared. After all, that was my reality. As an adult, when confronted with any new realizations about just how crappy the world really is—clearly perceiving the racist, imperialist, heterosexist structures surrounding me—I wasn't surprised. My deepest beliefs from childhood were simply confirmed. When I learned about these issues, when activists urged me to talk, become educated, organize, fight back, resist, I felt terror about doing so. My instinct, pounded into me physically and psychologically from a young age, was to keep silent and not confront anyone.

Child sexual abuse happens at a time when vulnerable children are developing a sense of self and a sense of the world, when we're developing connections and relationships with other people, when we're discovering how the world works and what we can expect from it. The beliefs, ideas, and attitudes that root during these years take us through our lives. (In pointing this out, I'm not saying these beliefs, ideas, and attitudes can't be changed.)

Let me spell out the structural aspects of child sexual abuse I grew up with. First, the secretive nature. Obviously, it's not openly acknowledged. No one said a word about this incredibly important aspect of my life. I knew it was happening. But perpetrators, their accomplices, and society at large told me it wasn't. They told me I was lucky to be surrounded by such good christian men. I learned about denial, about people refusing to acknowledge what literally stared them in the face, about injustice and oppression as secrets that can't be talked about. Sound familiar? Remind anyone of the blank stares on the faces of people being told about atrocities and massacres, about environmental pollution, about violence against women?

The secrecy and denial are closely linked with silence. Survivors keeping silent is of vital importance to perpetrators. Yet most of us manage to speak about it, directly or indirectly. I was no exception. From covert appeals to aunts, teachers, and family friends, to sitting down with my grade school principal and spelling out what the priests did to me, I attempted to break through the web of insidious silence. The result? Ignored

THINKING CLASS

and disbelieved, beaten to the point of death, locked up in a psych ward.

I learned firsthand about political oppression and about the denial, secrecy, silence, and brutal repercussions that go hand in hand with it. Injustice exists, yes, but don't name it and don't fight it. If no one cared about what happened to me as a child, in a society where people supposedly love children, why would anyone care about Palestinians in the West Bank? Why would political organizing appeal to me? Why would I assume I could take on a group of corporate executives who want to use my neighborhood as a toxic waste dump, when, after I put up one hand in a rather feeble attempt to stop one large adult male rapist, he banged my head on a wall for several long minutes?

After all, I already know what corporate executives are likely to do. People with power use it in horrible ways: they violate you however they want and they get away with anything. No one stops them, no matter how blatantly they flaunt their actions. Why would I tangle with a group of these people? Why would I want to take them on? And even if I did, what effect would it have? Resistance is futile. Remember?

Resistance is futile, no matter how much pain and suffering is going on all around you. I grew up in extreme pain and suffering. Looking back, the signs were obvious. Bruises all over me, catatonic state, consistently bloody underwear, constant anxiety and fear, inability to sleep. Not to mention talking openly about it. But my pain and suffering meant nothing. No one cared. There are important repercussions here. If I spend the first twenty years of life realizing no one cares about my pain, can I care about anyone else's? What chance is there that I can get to a genuine and generous place of healthy compassion? How willing will I be to take on the system?

I truly believe the powers that be want a society filled with docile, unthinking citizens who won't resist, challenge, and organize to change the many insidious forms of oppression around us. Many factors work into this, including the effects of such things as drugs, poverty, and television. But it's important

that people not ignore the ways child sexual abuse supports the deadly status quo.

Thousands of survivors numbed out from pain, denial, and silence don't make good activists. Repression of memories intensifies the numbness, and huge numbers of survivors do push down memories of the actual abuse. It's worth noting that repressing memories of detailed incidents of abuse doesn't mean forgetting the lessons about life the abuse teaches. Survivors don't forget knowledge of powerlessness, of denial and secrecy and support for oppression. Memory repression doesn't block out those lessons, but it does take an enormous effort. It's energy draining, and it stops people from becoming psychologically or emotionally healthy. How could anyone be healthy with chunks of life missing from his or her own memory, with profound, life-shaping experiences unavailable to the conscious mind?

I engaged in some political organizing work before I remembered and dealt with my childhood experiences. I wasn't able to interact well or challenge problematic abuses of power and privilege in these groups. Not surprisingly, chances for healthy group interaction, thoughtful reflection, and meaningful actions were limited. Most political activists have watched groups fall apart because of horrible group dynamics. As I've watched this happen in recent years, I've had strong hunches that unresolved childhood trauma was at least partly responsible for what happened.

To change the world, we need engaged, emotionally healthy people. This doesn't mean we hide out for decades in a therapist's office before venturing to show up at a demo. It does mean we understand that our most deeply set beliefs and ideas profoundly affect our organizing work, that our childhood experiences, ranging from dysfunction to extreme abuse, need to be tackled in the same way oppressive social systems need to be tackled.¹⁰

the left

Outside of feminism, progressive movements rarely state opposition to child abuse, let alone take action. I can't conceive of any acceptable reasons for this great failure. I certainly don't buy the response that men fighting racism would weaken their focus by

THINKING CLASS

including child abuse. Acknowledging and analyzing child abuse—as well as sexism, heterosexism, classism, ableism—strengthens our ability to analyze and resist racism.

When we take a step back and figure out who's organized against child sexual abuse and why, several things become clear. Feminists have tackled the issue and come up with an analysis of child sexual abuse stemming largely from gender oppression and sexism. In other words, a safe analysis for a group predominantly made up of women. This analysis draws a safe boundary around the people out "there" (that is, men) who abuse children, and the people "here" who don't. No wonder survivors bringing up issues of abusive mothers didn't go over so well in the women's movement.

For social-change movements to take seriously what I'm saying about child sexual abuse (and I'm including feminists here), activists must acknowledge the bad people who rape children are not out there, they're in here. We know this from survivors' stories; perpetrators come from every place in the political spectrum. The lines can't be clearly drawn anymore. All of us have to seriously grapple with the fact that perpetrators regularly attend our meetings and our demos.

While I do not ignore the genuine concern feminists have for child abuse, it seems clear to me feminists began the discussion because it was safe to do so. No group members were challenged. Now it's time to move on. If we're going to change the situation, we need to start with strong, mature political activists who aren't afraid to acknowledge that there are perpetrators in our groups.

Dealing with child abuse involves several things for activists. First, we need the maturity and strength to take stock of misuses of power and privilege within our groups. Second, we need to follow through with what we say; if we truly do care about all oppressed peoples, we must extend this to kids down the street. Third, we must engage in clear strategic thinking about the ramifications of large-scale child abuse. The strength of left-wing movements comes in part from helping people engage in critical thinking, from helping people steer clear of unquestioningly accepting the falsehoods spewed out daily by the mass media. Child sexual abuse, as a phenomenon, directly benefits big business

and government by ensuring a compliant population. As I outlined earlier, such childhoods don't steer us toward a life of street activism and critical thinking; rather, we end up with a fear of authority, a willingness to accept tyranny, a terror of fighting back.

Feminists have achieved extraordinary successes in spite of these factors by organizing against child abuse and empowering survivors. Many of us have learned to question authority, to refuse to accept abuse as a normal part of life, to fight back, and to analyze, reject, and counter misinformation not only about ourselves but about prisoners, the Two-Thirds World, homeless people. There's a message here for other progressive movements.

conclusion

Each day I'm disgusted by the lies about family, home, children, and parents that circulate in the media, schools, churches, and government—lies about warm feelings toward family dwellings, childhood as a time of innocence and happiness, parents' ever-present love for children, and fond memories of and nostalgic desires to return to tender years. As politically calculated as those about people of color and disabled people, these lies obscure reality and support abusers.

As political activists, we need to break through the lies, must listen to children and to adult survivors who tell the truth of life inside cramped apartments and three-story mansions. We need to grapple with the huge numbers of survivors walking among us and, probably more difficult, the huge numbers of perpetrators walking among us. This will not be an abstract task, since perpetrators run the political spectrum from right-wing fascists to left-wing radicals. Clearly, this issue needs to be taken up, and taken seriously, by all progressive movements. It can't be left to feminists, nor can it be acknowledged as a personal, individual problem survivors need to deal with at home.

We need to support each other. If child sexual abuse—and other forms of child abuse—were routinely acknowledged in more political circles as important and worth taking seriously, we'd be in better shape. As well as integrating an analysis of various forms of oppression into our political work, I believe we also need to

THINKING CLASS

integrate personal experiences (without letting them take over every discussion). While individual therapy and healing physical touch from friends and trained, ethical professionals may be tools survivors utilize on the road to healing, it's equally important to know that fellow activists care about the issue and care about us. This helps break down the messages that we mustn't talk about the issue and that we must carry the trauma alone. Our own childhood experiences, ranging from severe abuse to racism in the schoolyard, must be part of the discussions in left-wing communities. While I'm blessed to have this integration of the personal and political in my life, I know it's the exception rather than the rule.

As activists, we can offer support within our own circles and we can influence the kind of care available to survivors. We can push for politicized therapists who understand how child sexual abuse fits with other oppressions, and who offer affordable therapy for everyone. And when we're lobbying for national health care, we need to make sure emotional/psychological health care is included. Rich people's medical benefits include private therapy. Why shouldn't ours?

As activists, we need to place child oppression in our political context. We can't talk about child abuse without acknowledging and examining child oppression. Where are children's concerns, issues, voices in our groups? How do we treat children, in our political work, in our home lives, in our communities? If we don't abuse them, do we treat them with dignity and respect?

Finally, I want to say that healing from traumatic experiences is possible. Difficult and painful and exhausting, but possible and very much worth the struggle. It has taken years for me to come to this, to discard earlier beliefs about myself as a broken individual in an uncaring world. With a supportive community, with a political analysis, with time, love and caring, survivors of child sexual abuse are able to confront the past, work through and let go of unhelpful belief systems, and move on to emotionally-vibrant, politically-active and fulfilling lives.

notes

1. I find the phrase "ritual abuse/torture" the most appropriate for describing this kind of abuse. "Ritual abuse" on its own doesn't indicate that the most brutal forms of torture are involved, and "torture" on its own ignores the systematic and carefully planned aspects of this kind of abuse. Keeping the phrase together with the slash (/) indicates the deep, intrinsic connections I experienced between them. A helpful resource is Chrystine Oksana, *Safe Passage to Healing: A Guide for Survivors of Ritual Abuse* (New York: Harper Perennial Press, 1994).
2. Girls are raped by boys their own age. That is child sexual abuse perpetrated against girls by perpetrators who have power over them because of the institution of sexism. When a man rapes a girl, there are aspects of at least two social institutions—sexism plus the power that comes with adulthood.
3. I still feel shock about the numbers of survivors I know personally. One set of statistics, verified by the FBI, that bastion of feminist activity, states that one in four girls and one in seven boys will be sexually assaulted before the age of eighteen. Actual incidence is probably a lot higher than that.
4. I'm singling out feminists because they're the only group which has consistently dealt with this issue.
5. Diana Russell, *The Secret Trauma* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), p. 298.
6. Andrea Dworkin, "Violence Against Women: It Breaks the Heart, Also the Bones," *Letters from a War Zone* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1989), p. 174.
7. Other oppressions connect with the issue of which children's material needs are met and which are not.
8. Thanks to Elizabeth Clare for helping me clarify my thoughts around classism and ableism.
9. It's difficult to talk about disabled children as a cohesive group since their experiences vary so widely. For example, a deaf child living at home with parents who know American Sign Language has a much different experience from a child without use of arms and legs in a chronic care facility. Of course, most able-bodied people don't notice these intense differences, and tend to see all disabled people as weak and helpless.
10. Jan Binder gave me a great deal of help with this section.